

PHILOSOPHIES OF LIFE (H)

PHIL 1213 – 62314

Fall 2021

Instructor: Dr. Heather Stewart (she/they)

Email: heather.stewart@okstate.edu

Meeting Time: T/TH 10:30-11:45

Office Hours: T, Th 2:30-4:00 or by appointment

Meeting Location: LSW 201

Office Location: via Zoom. Email for Zoom info.

Course Description: This course introduces and analyzes a variety of philosophical perspectives on life, death, and what it means to live well. We will consider topics such as the meaning and value of life, whether existence is inherently valuable and what implications our answer to that question has for the morality of reproduction and bringing new life into existence, whether we should fear death, whether it is rational to desire immortality, the rationality and morality of suicide, and how to live well with the time we have on Earth. We will also consider what it means to live well with others, as social and political beings, particularly in societies structured by social and political injustice.

In examining these questions, we will grapple together with big, difficult questions at the heart of what it means to be a human. In grappling with such complex questions, students will develop their critical thinking skills, refine their ability to make compelling arguments, and strengthen their skills in communicating their ideas verbally and in writing. Students will examine multiple perspectives on controversial issues, and in so doing, will learn how to charitably evaluate alternative viewpoints and make considered judgements about their own beliefs and values.

Course Goals:

Upon successful completion of this course, students will have developed skills in the following:

- Close reading of philosophical texts
- Analyzing complex arguments
- Thinking critically about the meaning and value of life and death
- Understanding philosophical terms and concepts necessary for thinking critically about life, death, and value
- Formulating logical arguments and articulating them clearly, both verbally and in writing
- Engaging charitably with others about difficult and deeply personal issues

Humanities Course Designation:

This course meets the requirements for the “H” general education requirement. The purpose of courses which meet this requirement is to “concentrate on the expression, analysis, and interpretation of ideas and the aesthetics or values that have formed and informed individuals and societies.” In this class, we will consider the meaning and value of life itself, of death, and of living as a social and political being in community with others.

Another goal of “H” courses is to develop skills in written communication and critical analysis. To this end, in this course we will work on writing skills, and you will receive substantial feedback on writing assignments to help you improve your writing.

Required Course Text:

You have one required book for this course, which is on order at the campus bookstore. The book is the following:

Life, Death, & Meaning, David Benatar (editor), Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2016.

You will also have supplemental materials, which will be made available to you on our course site.

All readings which are in your required course text are labeled with “LD&M” on the course schedule.

Course Evaluation:

The work required for this course will come in the following assignment types:

- I. **In-Class Quizzes: (10% of course grade)**
Twelve times throughout the term, there will be an unannounced reading quiz given in class. I will drop the two lowest grades for each student (which includes quizzes missed for absences). This means that ten quiz scores will be factored into your final grade. The quizzes are not meant to be particularly difficult. The goal is to ensure that you are coming to class prepared, and that you have completed the required readings for each given day.

- II. **Response Papers: (10% each, 30% of course grade)**
Three times throughout the semester, you will write a response paper which addresses readings and topics from the course. You will receive feedback on these in order to help you improve your writing between the first and final response. The goal of these papers is to critically reflect on and respond to the course material. You are expected to write between 900 and 1,000 words for each response. In writing the reflections, you can either disagree with an argument from one of the readings (e.g., raise a thoughtful and fair objection or counterexample), develop a point of agreement with one of the arguments from one of the readings (e.g., provide a different reason in favor of one of the readings), or engage in synthesis (e.g., bring together ideas from multiple readings). The goal is to demonstrate understanding of the course material *and* to develop your critical thinking skills.

- III. **Exams: (30% each, 60% of course grade)**
You will have two exams in the course, each worth equal weight. The first exam will cover material from the first half of the course. It will be written during our regularly scheduled class time. The second exam will cover material from the second half of the course. It will be given during our scheduled final exam period. The format of the exams will be comprised of a mix of multiple choice, short answer, and short essay style questions.

Notes on Late Work:

Please try your absolute best to submit all of your assignments on time. Late work will only be accepted if you have prior approval from me or in the event of a documented emergency. All other work will be penalized at a rate of 5% per day. If you know that you won't be able to complete an assignment on time, I strongly encourage you to communicate that with me in advance so that we can agree upon an extension and establish a plan to get the work completed.

*Note: Quizzes will not be available late or as a make-up, without documented reason for absence. Two quizzes are dropped, which allows for two no-questions-asked absences from class.

Grade Breakdown:

A: 90-100 (4.0)

B: 80-89 (3.0)

C: 70-79 (2.0)

D: 60-69-96 (1.0)

F: 59 or below (0.0)

Note: Extra credit will not be offered. All students are expected to meet the same evaluative standards required for each grade assignment.

Course Expectations:

- You are expected to come to all classes prepared and ready to participate in discussion. Adequate preparation requires reading all required course materials at least once, but more ideally, twice. It also helps to mark up the text and make note of any questions you have about it as you read through. Bring these questions with you to lecture!
- You are expected to bring a copy of the assigned reading for the day to class with you to refer back to you as we discuss together. You should be prepared to turn to the text upon my request in class, or to use the text to complete group discussions with your peers.
- Email etiquette: Please keep all email correspondence professional! Include a greeting (e.g., “Good afternoon Dr. Stewart” or “Dear Professor”) and make clear that you are a student in this course in the subject line (e.g., in the subject line include the course number you are registered in). Write your emails in complete sentences – this isn’t Twitter! 😊
- I aim to treat each student with upmost respect. This includes respect for all dimensions of identity (e.g., ethnicity, religious identity, gender identity, and so on), as well as personal belief systems (e.g., religious, political). Should I fall short in any way, I ask that you bring it to my attention and to hold me accountable (also in a respectful manner). I am learning and growing, too. That said, I expect the same degree of respect and humility from each student in the course. You are expected to treat me and your peers respectfully and engage our course materials charitably and respectfully as well.
- It is not expected – or required – that you will agree with every argument you encounter in this course. However, it is both expected and required that you take the ideas and arguments presented in this course seriously and approach them openly and respectfully. Disrespectful, demeaning, or insulting language – whether toward your classmates or course materials – will not be tolerated.
- Relatedly, some of the content of this course might challenge your previously held views or ask you to consider things outside of your own lived experience. At times, stepping outside of one’s comfort zone can make one feel defensive, resistant, angry, or even fearful. I ask that you acknowledge these feelings when they arise and understand that they are part of the process of growing and learning. Changing your mind on something can be uncomfortable but can be the epistemically and socially responsible thing to do in light of new evidence. If anything in the course ever inspires discomfort or dysphoria that goes beyond this, please do seek out resources with psychological services, or bring this to my attention so I can assist in pointing you toward the appropriate services.

- On that last point, if upon viewing the course reading list you anticipate that anything will be particularly difficult or triggering to you, please bring this to my attention privately. We can work through that together and make accommodations where feasible and necessary.

HOW TO SUCCEED IN THE COURSE:

- It is my top priority and my sincerest hope that each student is able to succeed in this course. Should any circumstances arise that might hinder your success in this course, I ask you to please bring them to be in a prompt manner. Doing so allows us to think together about strategies we might enact to help ensure your success.
- As noted above, it is imperative that you stay engaged with the course material as we progress through the course. Though each student likely has a sense of how they learn best, some general recommendations include the following: read each reading twice, take notes and mark up the text while you read, and ask yourself reflective questions while reading (e.g., “what is the main thesis here?” and “how is the author defending it?”). If reading philosophy is new to you, and you find yourself struggling, please reach out to me! We can strategize ways for you to get the most out of the readings.
- Use me as a resource. Come to office hours. Ask questions. The goal is for you to learn as much as possible *and* to enjoy this course as much as possible!

COVID-19:

We are still in the midst of an ongoing global pandemic and public health crisis – the COVID-19 pandemic is far from over, and still poses a serious threat to all, and especially to the unvaccinated (including children under 12) and the immunocompromised. As such, we have a collective responsibility to try to reduce viral transmission, and consequently, the risk of harms to others. To this end, *it is an expectation* that you will wear a mask in the classroom and that you will do your best to maintain a safe social distance from your classmates (i.e., try your best to stay 6 feet apart). In the classroom, I request that anyone who is approaching me (e.g., to chat before or after class) to do so only when masked, and to ensure that I am masked before you approach. Establishing this boundary is for my safety and yours. Let me clarify here – though I cannot **require** masking in the classroom, I do **strongly encourage** mask compliance in the classroom.

As per the University’s statement on masking: “OSU encourages the use of masks indoors in public, especially in situations in which social distancing is not possible and for activities with close contact with others. Masking is recommended by the CDC even if you are fully vaccinated.” (<https://go.okstate.edu/coronavirus/latest-announcements/new-cdc-mask-guidance.html>).

When it comes to my office hours, I am requiring masks for *in-person* meetings that take place in my office. That said, if anyone is unwilling or unable to attend my office masked, I will offer alternative arrangements for meeting (e.g., we can meet virtually over Zoom).

In recognizing that the pandemic still poses serious health risks, I recognize that there might be times when students are unable to attend class in person (e.g., if one is exposed and needs to quarantine). When this is the case, please communicate with me about alternative arrangements for staying up with course material. It is my promise to you to be maximally flexible and understanding, and to help ensure your success at this time. All COVID-19 exposures need to be reported to the university to facilitate

contact tracing. Please use the University contact tracing form available at the following link: <https://uhs.okstate.edu/covid-reporting.html>.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

In our class, we collectively acknowledge the original inhabitants of the land of present-day Stillwater, upon which Oklahoma State University presently sits. The original and rightful peoples of these lands speak languages from the Caddoan, Kiowa-Tanoan, and Siouan language families. We respectfully acknowledge these peoples and their histories, and create space for reflection on the harmful past and ongoing treatment which results from colonial and genocidal projects. We engage in this reflection so we can be reflective about how to heal and repair damaged relationships and promote Indigenous sovereignty and justice for Indigenous peoples moving forward.

UNIVERSITY RESOURCES:

The following are resources available to you as a student at OK State:

Basic Needs Support: It is difficult – if not impossible – to succeed in your classes when your basic human needs are not being adequately met. If you are experiencing food insecurity, housing insecurity, or any other personal or financial hardship that might impeded your success in the course (or, more importantly, your health, safety, or wellbeing), please see the University’s Basic Needs Supports at the following link: <https://lcl.okstate.edu/basicneeds/index.html>. You can also reach out to me and I will help put you in touch with available resources.

Academic Supports: As an OK State student, there are many resources available to you to help you thrive as a student and get as much as possible out of your courses. Available resources can help you improve upon your study habits, master course content, improve your writing skills, and more. I recommend taking advantage of these resources – and not only if/when you find yourself struggling or falling behind. They can be great resources for staying ahead and developing as a student. See available resources at the following link: https://ssc.okstate.edu/academic_support.html.

OTHER HELPFUL RESOURCES:

There are innumerable resources online, but they vary greatly in terms of their quality. If you are looking for supplementary resources on any of our topics, or want to explore topics in philosophy more generally, there are some reliable sites you should look to first:

- **SEP (The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy):** <http://plato.stanford.edu/>
- **IEP (The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy):** <http://www.iep.utm.edu/>
- **The UnMute Podcast** (e.g., on Apple Podcasts or other podcast services)

If there is a particular topic in philosophy that you are interested in learning more about, and you would like recommended resources, please feel free to ask! I would be happy to point you in the direction of good source materials for any topic you might be interested in pursuing.

OTHER IMPORTANT NOTES AND INFORMATION:

Accessibility and Accommodation:

If you require accommodations in order to succeed in the course, I request that you register those with Accessibility Services as soon as possible. The relevant information can be found here: <https://accessibility.okstate.edu//>

Title IX:

Oklahoma State University, as a public educational institution, must abide by Title IX regulations because it receives federal funding through federal financial aid programs used by students. Specifically, Title IX states: “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.” If you have any questions about what that all means, please see the following site for detailed information: <https://hr.okstate.edu/equal-opportunity/title-ix.html>.

Diversity:

The following is OK State’s Diversity Statement: “Oklahoma State University is a land-grant institution committed to excellence in diversity and inclusion. We strive to maintain a welcoming and inclusive environment that appreciates and values all members of the University community. We define diversity as engagement in meaningful actions, behaviors, and conversations that reflect a commitment to recognizing, understanding, and respecting the differences among students, faculty, staff, and visitors throughout the OSU system. We do not condone acts, behavior, language or symbols that represent or reflect intolerance or discrimination. OSU is dedicated to cultivating and enriching the competitive advantages that diversity and inclusion provides all members of the University community. We identify diversity as a quality of life issue, as well as an important economic driver for the prosperity and well-being of the state, nation, and world.

The Division of Institutional Diversity focuses on the development of a more inclusive community of learners and leaders while striving to address the complexities that emerge. We value all voices in our community. We strive to serve every member of the OSU family. Our goal is to maintain campus communities throughout the University system that are socially, culturally, and globally competent.”

If you have any questions about issues pertaining to diversity and the University’s commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion on campus, please see the following site: <http://catalog.okstate.edu/about/institutional-diversity/>. Let me reiterate that we will observe maximal respect for diversity in this classroom.

Academic Integrity:

OSU is committed to maintaining the highest standards of integrity and ethical conduct. This level of ethical behavior and integrity will be maintained in this course. Participating in a behavior that violates academic integrity (e.g., unauthorized collaboration, plagiarism, multiple submissions, cheating on examinations, fabricating information, helping another person cheat, unauthorized advance access to examinations, altering or destroying the work of others, and altering academic records) will result in an official academic sanction. Violations may subject you to disciplinary action including the following: receiving a failing grade on an assignment, examination or course, receiving a notation of a violation

of academic integrity on your transcript, and being suspended from the University. You have the right to appeal the charge.

COURSE SCHEDULE

*Note: I reserve the right to make edits to this schedule as necessary. Though I will make every effort to follow the schedule as it appears below, I recognize that things come up and we may need to switch gears or move things around in response. I appreciate your flexibility should changes become necessary. Should this be the case, you will be notified via announcement on the course site.

*Some materials are listed as optional. Any materials indicated as such **are not formal requirements for the course**. Rather, they are made available to you to further your exploration of course topics, or to deepen your understanding of the issues at hand. You can, of course, bring the optional materials into your written assignments! However, you will not be tested on them in quizzes or exams.

* A final note. There are **many** more topics that I would include in this course if we had infinite time. Alas, we are limited by time, and thus I am limited in what I can include here. If you have any interest in issues that relate to those being covered here, let's chat about them.

I. INTRODUCTION

Tue. Aug. 17

Welcome + Introductions

Syllabus Review and Course Overview

The Value of Studying Philosophy

*Optional (though strongly recommended if you are new to philosophy):
David Concepcion, "How to Read Philosophy," pp. 358-368.

II. THE MEANING OF LIFE

Thu. Aug. 19

Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus"

Richard Taylor, "The Meaning of Life" (LD&M)

Tue. Aug. 24

W. D. Joske, "Philosophy and the Meaning of Life" (LD&M)

Thu. Aug. 26

Robert Nozick, "Philosophy and the Meaning of Life" (LD&M)

Tue. Aug. 31 Susan Wolf, "The Meaning of Lives" (LD&M)

III. ON THE VALUE OF CREATING NEW LIFE

Thu. Sep. 2 David Benatar, "Why It Is Better Never to Come Into Existence" (LD&M)

Derek Parfit, "Whether Causing Someone to Exist Can Benefit this Person" (LD&M)

Tue. Sep. 7 John Leslie, "Why Not Let Life Become Extinct?" (LD&M)

Thu. Sep. 9 Les Knight, "Experience: I Campaign for the Extinction of the Human Race."
<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/jan/10/i-campaign-for-the-extinction-of-the-human-race-les-knight>

Todd May, "Would Human Extinction Be a Tragedy?"
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/17/opinion/human-extinction-climate-change.html>

IV. ON DEATH

Tue. Sep. 14 Epicurus, "Letter to Menoecus"

Frederik Kaufman, "100 Word Philosophy: Is Death Bad? Epicurus and Lucretius on the Fear of Death"

DUE: First Response Paper

Thu. Sep. 16 Stephen E. Rosenbaum, "How to Be Dead and Not Care: A Defense of Epicurus" (LD&M)

Tue. Sep. 21 David B. Suits, "Why Death is Not Bad for the One Who Died" (LD&M)

V. SHOULD WE DESIRE IMMORTALITY?

Thu. Sep. 23 Bernard Williams, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality" (LD&M)

To view and discuss in class: Jason Isbell, "If We Were Vampires" (Does mortality give love its meaning/value?)

- Tue. Sep. 28 John Martin Fischer, "Why Immortality is Not So Bad?" (LD&M)
- Thu. Sep. 30 Christine Overall, "From Here to Eternity: Is It Good to Live Forever?" (LD&M)
- Tue. Oct. 5 **Mid-Term Exam (In Class)**

VI. REFLECTIONS ON SUICIDE

- Thu. Oct. 7 David Hume, "Of Suicide" (LD&M)
- Tue. Oct. 12 Immanuel Kant, "Suicide and Duty" (LD&M)
- Thu. Oct. 14 David Benatar, "Suicide: A Qualified Defense" (LD&M)

VII. ATTITUDES TOWARD LIFE: OPTIMISM AND PESSIMISM

- Tue. Oct. 19 Arthur Schopenhauer, "On the Sufferings of the World" (LD&M)
- Reggie Ugwu, "Should We Be More Pessimistic?"
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/17/arts/pessimism-life-coronavirus.html>
- Thu. Oct. 21 Samantha Vice, "Optimism and Meaning" (LD&M)
- Tue. Oct. 26 Bruce N. Waller, "The Sad Truth: Optimism, Pessimism, and Pragmatism" (LD&M)

VIII. ON LIVING WELL WITH THE TIME WE'VE GOT

- Thu. Oct. 28 Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, "Book I"
<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.1.i.html>
- Edith Hall, "Why Read Aristotle Today?"
<https://aeon.co/essays/what-can-aristotle-teach-us-about-the-routes-to-happiness>
- *Optional: Kirk Berk, "1000 Word Philosophy: Happiness: What Is It to Be Happy?"
- *Optional: The Ethics Center, "Ethics Explainer: Eudaimonia"

Tue. Nov. 2 Epictetus, *The Enchiridion*, I-XXI

Massimo Pigliucci, “To Be Happier, Focus on What is Within Your Control”
<https://aeon.co/ideas/to-be-happier-focus-on-whats-within-your-control>

*Optional: John Sellars, “Want to Be Happier? Then Live Like a Stoic For a Week.” <https://theconversation.com/want-to-be-happy-then-live-like-a-stoic-for-a-week-103117>

Due: Response Paper 2

VII. ON RESPONDING WELL TO THE WORLD WE’RE IN

Thu. Nov. 4 Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter From Birmingham Jail”

Meena Krishnamurthy, “What Martin Luther King Jr. Really Thought About Riots” <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/09/martin-luther-king-riots-looting-biden>.

*Optional: This Day in Esoteric Political History, “Letter From Birmingham Jail” (Podcast Episode).

Tue. Nov. 9 John Lewis, “Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation”
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/30/opinion/john-lewis-civil-rights-america.html>.

*Optional: Rashawn Ray, “Five Things John Lewis Taught Us About Getting in ‘Good Trouble’” <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/how-we-rise/2020/07/23/five-things-john-lewis-taught-us-about-getting-in-good-trouble/>.

Thu. Nov. 11 Avery Kolers, “The Moral Duty of Solidarity”
<https://www.philosophersinamerica.com/2018/04/30/the-moral-duty-of-solidarity/>

*Optional: The Unmute Podcast with Myisha Cherry, “Epiode 031: Serene Khader on Cross-Border Feminist Solidarity” (Podcast Episode)

Tue. Nov. 16 Myisha Cherry, “Love, Anger, and Racial Injustice”

*Optional: Why We Argue, “Anger, Rage, and Forgiveness with Myisha Cherry” (Podcast Episode)

*Optional: Audre Lorde, “The Uses of Anger”

Thu. Nov. 18 Barrett Emerick, “Love and Resistance: Moral Solidarity in the Face of Perceptual Failure”

Due: Response Paper 3

Tue. Nov. 23 Fall break – find time to relax! ☺

Thu. Nov. 25 Holiday – spend time with loved ones or engage in self-care!

Tue. Nov. 30 Kate Norlock, “Perpetual Struggle”

Thu. Dec. 2 Last Day of Classes! ☺

Ian James Kidd, “Philosophical Misanthropy”

https://philosophynow.org/issues/139/Philosophical_Misanthropy

Tue. Dec 7 **Final Exam: 10:00 – 11:50 am.**

SUMMARY OF COURSE DEADLINES:

September 14: Response Paper 1

October 5: In Class Midterm Exam

November 2: Response Paper 2

November 18: Response Paper 3

December 7: Final Exam